

The prints of Louise Bourgeois : September 13, 1994-January 3, 1995

Author

Bourgeois, Louise, 1911-2010

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1994

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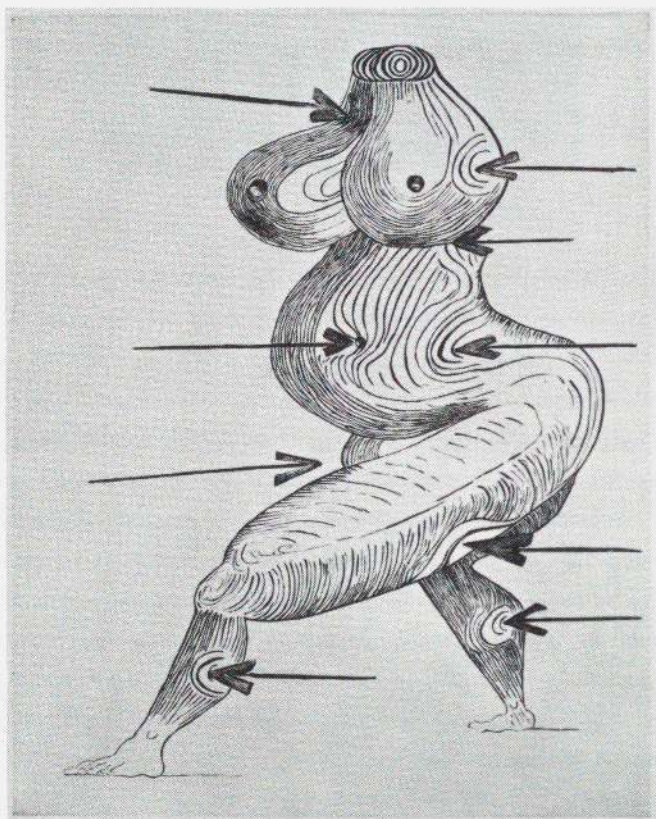
The Museum of Modern Art

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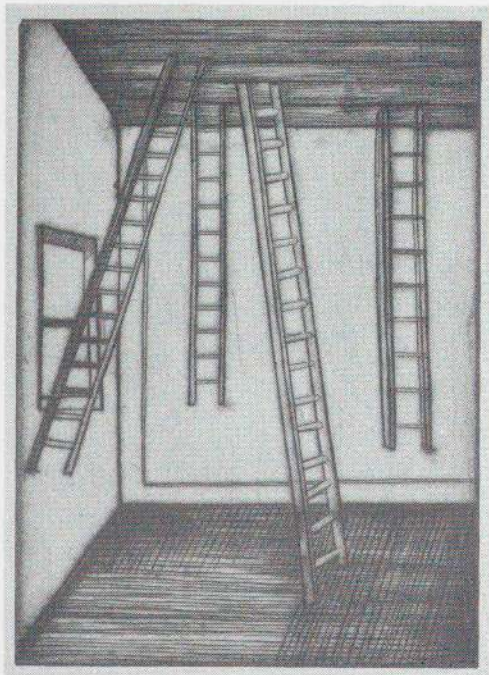
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The Prints of Louise Bourgeois



September 13, 1994 – January 3, 1995

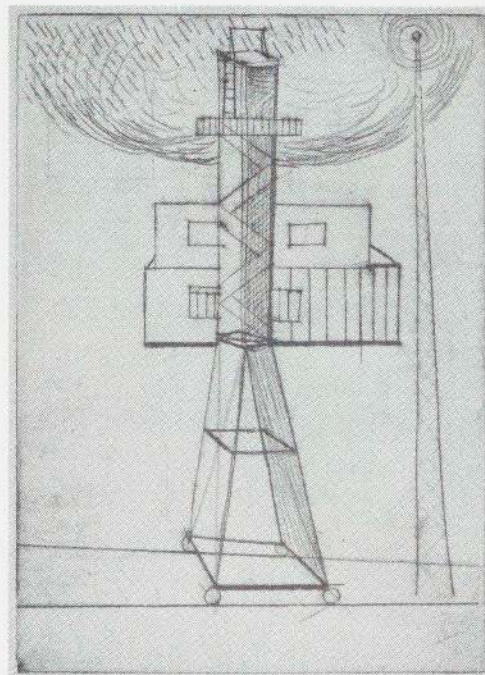
The Museum of Modern Art
New York



Louise Bourgeois, at 82 years old, is one of America's most important and influential artists. Born in Paris in 1911, she married an American and moved to New York in 1938. Over five decades, she has produced a body of sculpture of unusual power and originality, for which she was given the honor of representing the United States at the 1993 Venice Biennale. The Museum of Modern Art acquired its first sculpture by Bourgeois in 1951 and now has nine pieces in its permanent collection; it also mounted a retrospective exhibition of her work in 1982. In 1990, the artist made a remarkable gift to the Museum of her entire body of prints, which reflects, at intimate scale, many of the same concerns as her sculpture. This exhibition celebrates that gift, and the publication by the Museum of the complete catalogue of her print oeuvre.

Since 1938, Bourgeois has undertaken approximately 150 compositions in print. Many of these have undergone significant changes through sequences of states and variant impressions, resulting in a body of printed work numbering some 600 sheets. Since few editions were made, most of these sheets are themselves unique works of art. Roughly half of Bourgeois's prints were created from 1938 to 1949 and half from 1973 to 1993 (most of the latter were produced in the last five years). As Bourgeois continues to make prints, examples will be added to the Museum's permanent collection.

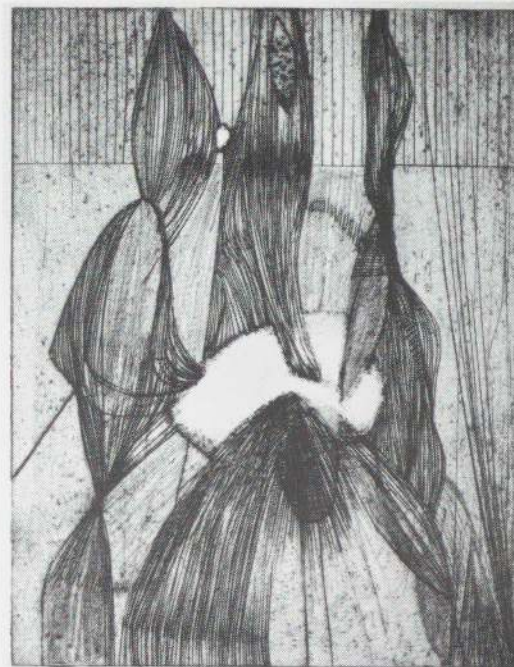
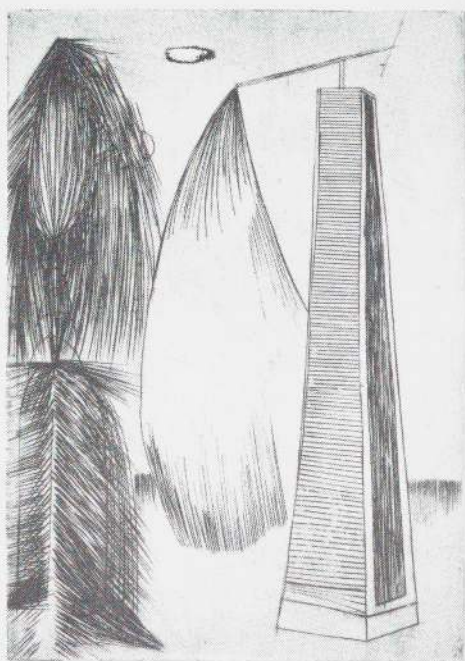
Bourgeois's best known printed work, *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, consists of nine engravings and nine parables.



Although created in 1947, this work deals with issues that remain relevant to the artist today. As a group, the engravings comprise, in Bourgeois's words, "a drama of the self," and, in fact, that phrase may be used to describe much of her work. In her prints as in her sculpture, the examination and expression of the self preoccupy Bourgeois and constitute a kind of self-portraiture. For her, art becomes a tool or strategy that serves a function: it provides emotional release and self-understanding. Through the process of creation, she can sort out her memories, appreciate and control her moods, alleviate anxiety, analyze a troubling situation, or even savor a joyous moment.

Bourgeois's compositions often evoke narratives prompted by the artist's personal motivations, but which awaken the viewer's imagination, as well. Combining real and invented elements, as in *Plate 8 of He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, wherein ladders are depicted as suspended from the ceiling, Bourgeois endows such elements with a psychological dimension. She describes them as "attaching to the ceiling as a defense against losing one's balance on the ground." She adds, "One is not trapped . . . the window shows that all the ladders could fit out." The implication is that emotional balance and coping mechanisms are at stake.

Creating enclosed settings, such as the one in *Plate 8 of He Disappeared into Complete Silence* is a strategy that recurs in Bourgeois's work. In the last few years, for example, she has constructed a series of room-like installations in sculpture, wherein dramas are implied by the



furnishings and objects inside. There is, in fact, a remarkable consistency of subjects and their formal embodiments throughout the fifty-year span of Bourgeois's art. The unpredictability of despairing moods, for instance, is a subject that appears again and again. In *Pont transbordeur* (*Drawbridge*) of 1946/1947, threatening storm clouds hover above a central architectural structure, and also the smaller, radar-like tower which gives the structure, according to the artist, the means "to watch for danger, both day and night." In other prints is a depiction of a figure with long, flowing hair, which reflects for the artist both a sign of beauty and a source of self-esteem. In *Pivotage difficile* (*Difficult Steering*), also of 1946/1947, the figure on the left becomes increasingly covered with hair as the states of the print evolve. As this occurs, Bourgeois says of her: "She is now completely secure; she is as pleased as Punch."

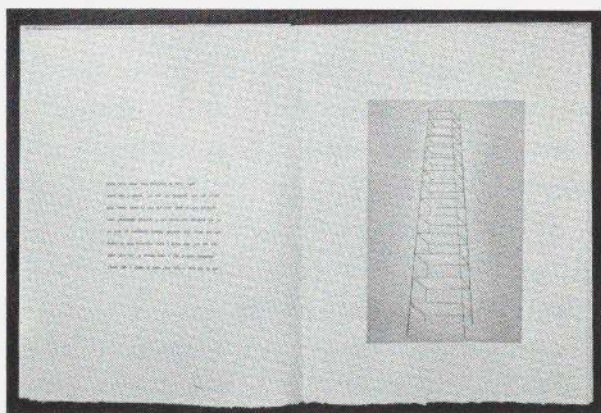
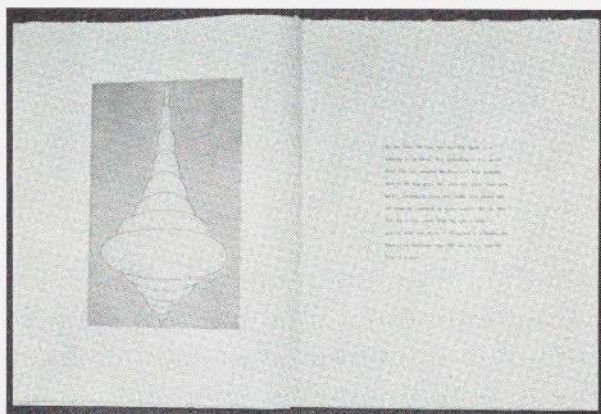
Another example of an early theme that has reappeared in recent work is the enormous responsibility of children, a subject which has preoccupied Bourgeois. Having raised three boys in the 1940s, that experience is alluded to in *Les Trois Fées* (*The Three Fairies*) of 1948. In discussing that work, she explains that three fairy godmothers emerge from her abstracted, repetitive strokes. It was not by plan, she says, but part of the creative process that those strokes turned into a fable of fairies who "take care of the baby," and "substitute for the mother." She goes on to say, "It becomes your job to play up to the fairies, to be on their good side in order to protect the child." This concern proves

indelible, and stays with the artist long after her children are grown. In discussing *Stamp of Memories I* (1993), Bourgeois points to three eggs hidden in an elaborate hairdo and says of the figure: "She becomes frightened for what she is responsible for . . . it is her three eggs . . . she takes them with her and hides them using her hair. . . . Don't make the gods jealous . . . if you have a beautiful child, hide it." But Bourgeois's work does not always communicate the apprehensions surrounding children. With *Self Portrait* (1993), derived from a drawing of the 1940s which maintained its emotional hold on her, Bourgeois enjoys a happy moment of parenthood. Even with all her deeply-held feminist beliefs about self-sufficiency, she says of this image: "Nothing happens unless men and women get along. There are two sides: father and mother. You don't know if the little figure is a boy or a girl, but it is a little god, regardless. This is a closed, eternal circle."

Just as *Self Portrait* can serve as a vehicle for preserving a moment of happiness, *the puritan*, her book with text and eight engravings published in 1990, helps Bourgeois examine a troubling memory. Here, she has chosen geometry as "a tool to understanding." Bourgeois had been a mathematics student in Paris before turning to art, and she has often voiced her appreciation of its ordering capabilities. In several prints, she seeks control over chaotic feelings by employing grid compositions. With *the puritan*, she "analyzed an episode forty years after it happened." She had written the text in 1947, and now, by adding

geometric compositions to accompany it, she says: "I could see things from a distance . . . I considered the situation objectively, scientifically, not emotionally. I was interested not in anxiety, but in perspective, in seeing things from different points of view."

Although Bourgeois demonstrates a calm rationality in *the puritan*, intense emotions of pain and vulnerability are more often the impetus for her artworks. Such emotions are communicated to the viewer in *Ste Sebastienne* (1990–93), one of her most complex printed images. Its evolution, through thirty-one states and variant impressions, illuminates her characteristic way of working in the printmaking medium. Bourgeois usually initiates a print with a drawing, either from the recent past or from long ago. *Ste Sebastienne*, which she began



in 1990, derived from a 1987 drawing. The print was executed in dry-point, a technique which involves digging into or scratching a metal plate with a special needle. These are the materials and tools she prefers. ("I want my digging in," she has said.) She worked on this print intensively through many states and variants, before abandoning it temporarily. She resumed work in 1991, and again in 1992. She enlarged photocopies of her earlier states and reconceived her compo-

the puritan (1). New York: Osiris Editions, 1990. Engraving with chine collé, 25 1/4 x 19 1/8" (65.5 x 50 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist

the puritan (2). New York: Osiris Editions, 1990. Engraving with chine collé, 25 1/4 x 19 1/8" (65.7 x 50 cm).
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist

sition on a larger plate. The figure's musculature was revealed and its head removed. Satisfied, she published this image as *Ste Sebastienne* (known as the "large" version). In 1993 Bourgeois returned to the smaller plate again, creating additional states, and finally published that version as *Stamp of Memories I*, with a *Stamp of Memories II* planned for soon after.

Bourgeois makes many changes when she works, no matter what the medium, but it is only in printmaking that the course of her creativity remains visible. She has said that she is always "searching," and that she is determined to express herself accurately; she finds it almost impossible to declare a work finished. The many states and variants of *Ste Sebastienne* evoke myriad interpretations. Bourgeois remarks that the

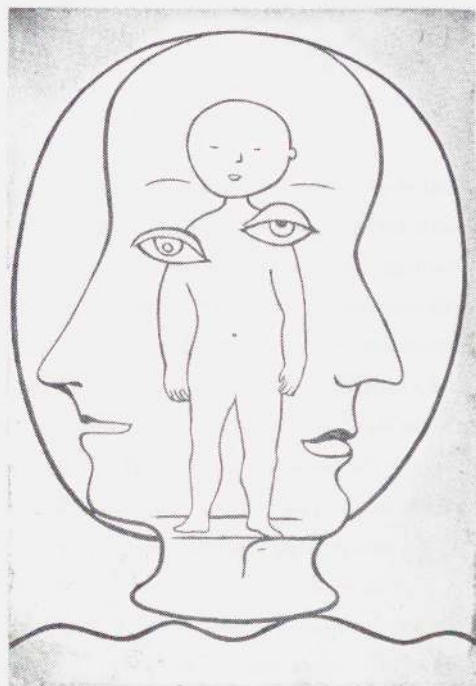


figure shows off, "by displaying her hair and her breasts," but then points out that "she antagonizes without knowing it." That antagonism is seen in the arrows which are "from the outside . . . they are not inner . . ." After covering the figure's body with impressions from the signet stamp of her father, Louis Bourgeois, in *Stamp of Memories I*, she comments: "The stamp is only skin-deep . . . it wants to be a brand . . . it is only a coat." Finally, with the figure enlarged and headless, she

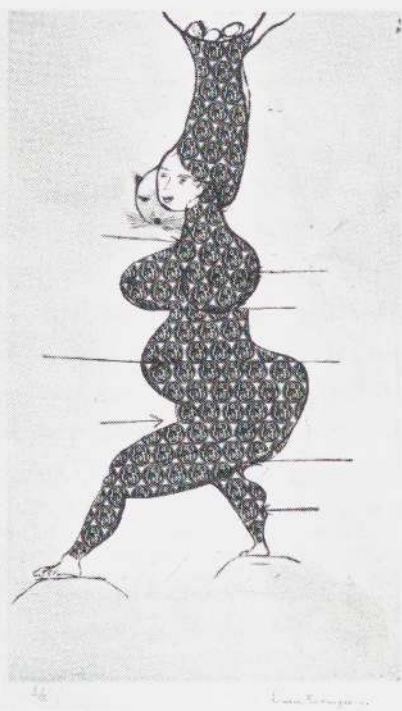
Self Portrait. State VII, 1990. Drypoint, soft ground etching, and lift ground aquatint, printed in color with chine collé, 15 1/4 x 10 3/8" (40.1 x 27.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist

observes: "The arrows make it lose its head. You say, she has a good head on her shoulders. Well, I'm not too sure of that!"

By combining will, intelligence, and artistic sensitivity to harness her strong emotions, Louise Bourgeois produces an evolving series of individual sheets during the many stages of her printmaking process, which testifies to the creative adventure she pursues in this medium. In her efforts to comprehend and control her deeply felt responses to people and events through her art, she has created a compelling and provocative body of printed works.

Deborah Wye

Curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books



This brochure has been made possible through the generosity of The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition has been supported in part by the Eunice Fearer Fund.

Available in The MoMA Bookstore: *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois* by Deborah Wye and Carol Smith. 9 1/2 x 12"; 256 pp.; 76 col. ill., 329 b/w. Cloth. \$85; members \$76.50.

COVER: *Ste Sebastienne*. Second version (known as *Ste Sebastienne* "large"). State VI. New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1992. Drypoint, 38 7/8 x 30 1/2" (98.9 x 78.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the artist

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Stamp of Memories I. First version (known as *Ste Sebastienne* "small"). State XIII.

New York: Peter Blum Edition, (1990 - 93, published in 1993).

Drypoint and metal stamp, 16 1/4 x 9 1/4" (42.6 x 25.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the artist